

The Humana Festival

Voyeurism, cultural historian Neal Gabler recently wrote, is the new national sport. Certainly, that thesis was evidenced at the 23rd annual Humana Festival of New American Plays at the Actors Theatre of Louisville. Gabler made his pronouncement after Barbara Walters' interview with Monica Lewinsky became the most-watched TV news program by a single network ever — and ATL gave us plays in which invasions of privacy, snooping, and eavesdropping were major elements.



Lucina Faraldo, Dallas Roberts, and Graeme Malcolm in Arthur Kopit's *Y2K*.

Most frightening was Arthur Kopit's mesmerizing *Y2K*, wherein a sinister computer hacker destroys the lives of a married couple by breaking into their computers, creating damaging information that ruins their careers and brings them under FBI surveillance; he even takes over their bank accounts, rendering them totally under his control. Kopit has said that the erotically charged play resulted from his fury over the methods used by Kenneth Starr to invade the privacy of the principals in the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal and everyone they knew. "I'm erect almost the whole time...breaking in where you're not supposed to go...secret entrances," the hacker con-

fides to the audience. The three leads — Graeme Malcolm and Lucinda Faraldo as the couple, Dallas Roberts as the hacker — excelled under Bob Balaban's direction.

Y2K and David Rambo's *God's Man in Texas* were the two standouts of this year's festival. Rambo's deeply satisfying work is set in one of those megachurches that has 30,000 members, a dinner theater, a bowling alley, two swimming pools, a bookshop, a ballpark, a football field, a cineplex for family movies, schools, and three Sunday

morning services that are filmed and televised. As depicted, Houston's Rock Baptist Church is the creation of 81-year-old Dr. Philip Gottschall (William McNulty), who fights against giving up the reins when an unauthorized pastoral search committee starts "auditioning" possible successors. There's humor and pathos in the playwright's treatment of the

megachurch culture; he resists overt criticism of those involved, avoiding any reference to the strident stands that some of them have taken on such issues as abortion and homosexuality. Rambo's satire is pointed, but gentle: The sermons preached by V. Craig Heidenreich (as Dr. Jeremiah "Jerry" Mears) and McNulty are so convincing that one has the feeling of actually being in church. John Dillon's direction of the Humana production was superb, as were the performances, and Paul Owen's church set was magnificent.

Anne Bogart's *Cabin Pressure*, conceived and directed by her and created by The SITI Company, is about the audience/actor relationship through-

out the history of theater. "You become something that watches," the audience is told by the actors. (Voyeurism again!) The work opens with the actors repeating scenes from Noël Coward's *Private Lives* over and over. Bogart also draws on material from such writers as Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, Artaud, and Brook. Interviews with Louisville theatergoers and scenes from Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, restoration comedies, old-time melodramas, and English drawing-room mysteries flesh out the play. While one relishes the marvelous acting and physicality of the SITI group, *Cabin Pressure* is lesser Bogart, not in a class with some of her earlier efforts.

Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls, written by Naomi Iizuka and directed by ATL producing director Jon Jory, seemed like a winner during its hilarious opening scenes, in which 10 Gen-X characters seek connections in their directionless lives in New York City "and many other exotic locales." But the play stops cold when Vivian (Carla Harting), the central character, rolls out a floor map of the U.S. and delivers a totally uninvolved monologue. The second act takes the group to various places, including Hawaii and Alaska, where they continue to age but not grow up. A line toward the end of the play sums it up nicely: One character wonders whether someone who is waving "aloha" means "hello," "goodbye," or "help!"

The Cockfighter, adapted and directed by Vincent Murphy from Frank Manley's novel of the same name, is a thoroughly unpleasant coming-of-age story about a sensitive, 12-year-old boy (Danny Seckel) whose vulgar, macho father (Phillip Clark) teaches him to be a carbon copy of the old man, a cockfighter who owns the "Snake Nation Cock Farm." The boy's mother (Ellen McQueen, who does quick changes to also play her slow-witted, alcoholic brother) ineffectually tries to keep him as her "baby," and make him

more like her. Much is made of other meanings of the word "cock," in a strained attempt at humor. All three players did well, particularly McQueen in her dual role. Pip Gordon's lighting and Paul Owen's circular fence set, with a simulated pit covered with bloody chicken-scratches, created the appropriate atmosphere. (No actual cockfights were staged; they're illegal in Kentucky.)

"Life Under 30" was a program of eight 10-minute plays written by three men and five women under the age of 30. The best were *Dancing With a Devil* by Brooke Berman, about the effects of a rape on a young woman; and *Drive Angry* by Matt Pelfrey, a disturbing piece with a shock ending about two young men, one dying of cancer, driving around Los Angeles.

Voyeurism also took center stage via three gimmicks that were part of this year's festival. As a setup for a series



Derek Cecil and Bruce McKenzie in Naomi Iizuka's *Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls*.

of "telephone plays," audience members could lift the receivers of five separate phones on the mezzanine and listen to ongoing conversations, much as one could do on old-fashioned party lines. In David Greenspan's *Them*, the characters discussed the possibility that "they" — whoever "they" are — might be listening; in Neal Bell's *Will You Accept the Charges?*, a phone call came

from the grave; Diana Son's *Happy Birthday Jack* had a man calling his old boyfriend on his birthday to "catch up" with him, as well as to "one up" him.

An automobile parked in front of the theater was the setting for Richard Dresser's 10-minute play called *What Are You Afraid Of?* Three spectators at a time sat in the back seat of the car, watching and listening to two actors — playing a male driver and the female hitchhiker he picks up — in the front seat. This was voyeurism up close and personal.

And the third gimmick? "The T(ext) Shirt Project." T-shirts printed with entire short plays by such playwrights as David Henry Hwang, Tony Kushner, Wendy Wasserstein, and Mac Wellman were on sale only at the festival for \$20 each. Those wearing them were likely to attract stares on the street, or anywhere else.

— Charles Whaley